

# Displacement and Professional Reintegration – 'Success Stories' from the European Refugee Crisis



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# Refugee-professionals in Europe

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Now well over a million refugees and asylum seekers in the EU (IOM, 2015, UNESCO, 2016).

A sub-group are **highly qualified professionals** who, having been displaced, often find themselves in low-skilled, minimum-wage jobs for which they are over-qualified (15K?).

Little research done to date into highly-skilled refugees and their employability challenges.



# The project

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*Critical Skills for Life and Work: Developing the Professional Intercultural Competence of Highly-Skilled Refugees* [cslw.eu](http://cslw.eu)

European Commission funded (2017-2019, ongoing), aims to enhance the employability and integration of refugee-professionals in three countries (the UK, the Netherlands and Austria), and then the rest of the EU (and beyond).

Strategic partnership is composed of Newcastle University (UK), Universitaet Graz (Austria), Fryske Akademy (The Netherlands) and Action Foundation (UK) working with local agencies, organisations, local authorities and individuals.



# Project aims

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The project focuses on the nature and development of ‘professional intercultural communicative competence’ (PICC) of

- (a) highly-skilled refugees and
- (b) the language teachers who work with them.

(CSLW, 2019; Young *et al*, 2009; Young & Sachdev, 2011)



# Today's focus...

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‘Success stories’ of former refugees who have re-entered the professional sphere:

- Part of needs analysis in stage 1 of the project
- Hear the ‘voices’ of refugee participants and draw some conclusions related to intercultural, intergroup communication...



# ‘Success stories’ of refugee professionals

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- 15 ‘success stories’ (8 in Austria; 5 in the UK; 2 in Netherlands)
- Recruiting participants using personal contacts and snowballing techniques
- Thematic content analysis of interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

## **Aims:**

- To understand the contextualised trajectories of highly-skilled refugees who successfully reconnected with their professions
- To explore their perspectives on what they feel facilitated or inhibited their successful development and so gain insights into their beliefs about what other highly skilled refugees would need to support their transition into professional roles

# Participant backgrounds (UK stories, today's focus)

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**Benjamin**, M, Eritrea, aged 47, 20 years in the UK; **previous occupation-** civil servant; **current occupation-** property developer and CEO of a local NGO

**Muneer**, M, Iraq, mid 40s, 16 years in the UK; **previous occupation -** trainee doctor; **current occupation -** lead psychiatrist in a mental health centre and lecturer

**Sadaf**, F, Iran, aged 44, 11 years in the UK; **previous occupation -** translator and language teacher; **current occupation -** published writer, translator and language teacher

**Hanes**, M, Eritrea, mid 30s, 11 years in the UK; **previous occupation -** worked for the Eritrean government and as a maths and computer science teacher; **current occupation -** consultant mechanical engineer

**Khaled**, M, Syria, late 40s, 3 years in the UK; **previous occupation -** senior civil engineer; **current occupation -** civil engineer

# Previous experiences of IC encounters

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All participants had limited contacts with foreigners, and especially western people in their countries, and limited experiences of travelling and IC encounters. None of them knew British people or had ever thought to live in or visit the UK:

*I did not want to leave my country and if I had a choice I would have not chosen this country because of its colonial past (Benjamin)*

Overall, they did not feel their previous experiences prepared them for living in the UK:

*I used to watch Hollywood movies, that's the only education that I had about the culture of the west and it not prepare me at all (Benjamin)*

*Iran was like a closed island and there are no social media at the time [...] what we knew was from books we read, films from the black market or somebody travels and tells you the stories but it was very rare (Sadaf)*



# Journey to current profession

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Participants' experiences (in all countries) varied according to:

- Nationality and circumstances of their application for asylum
- Personal circumstances (e.g. ease of validation of their degrees)
- Professional and job-market related factors

# Languages and ICC

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Overall, participants felt that their local and English language skills were vital to re-enter their professions.

*Without knowing English it would have been really difficult. **Language is a huge barrier (Sadaf)***

However, even participants who were educated in English felt that they were not prepared to their new life in the UK and needed to **‘understand the system and the culture’ (Sadaf).**

# Maintaining a positive and open attitude

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All participants showed an ability to look at difficult moments as learning experiences rather than as setbacks:

***I worked in a pizza shop. I worked in a news agency shop. I looked at it as something temporary. It was something that added to my experience in life, which possibly made me understand the community, it made me understand how to talk to people*** (Muneer)

***I started to work in a restaurant and in a coffee shop. For the coffee shop, I was excited it was a job that I had never seen in my country. It was not for women. It was the first time for me to make cappuccino and chat to people and drink coffee*** (Sadaf)

# Using pre-existing interpersonal skills in the new context

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Participants also valued the importance of their ability to exercise agency and to use transfer their interpersonal skills:

***Ambition is what I [have] got but also interpersonal skills you have to be good to people, and listen and understand and learn. I learnt those skills from back home and I could apply them here [making changes] because you have to fit with the culture and the law. [...] I found out that people are basically the same. (Benjamin)***

***The environment and people [helped me to feel integrated]. I've always fitted in well. It is also a reciprocal thing as I am easy-going and flexible (Muneer)***

# Interaction processes: rebuilding a social network

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All participants valued their ability to re-build a social and professional network and to build relationships with people who could help them (resonates with *savoir comprendre* in ICC model, Byram 1997; Barrett *et al*, 2013)

***The thing is that the social network you had back home disintegrated but you create a new one from scratch. The contacts I had in London were not useful but I made new ones through my interpreting job. (Benjamin)***

***The things that helped me the most were the networking and studying, starting study from scratch. [...] I tried very hard. I think that it's important finding somebody that you can trust. (Sadaf)***

# Sense of belonging and agency

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All participants valued how contributing to the new community, for example through volunteering, helped their own professional journey:

***I wanted to volunteer. I did it because I did not want to stay at home, I wanted to be out as much as possible. It was difficult because I was working at the restaurant but the rest of the time I just really wanted to be part of the community.*** (Sadaf)

***I also support newly arrived refugees. [...] I deal with some organisations that take care for refugees. We find solutions for the families.*** (Khaled)

# Self-motivation and resilience

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Although some participants benefitted from the support of language learning courses, local NGOs and peer-support, they mostly credit their success to themselves and their motivation:

*Refugees came here and they have to survive. At home, everything is taken for granted. **Here there are only two ways: either live or not to live and if you want to live just find something to fight for** (Sadaf)*

***I finished my degree, all by myself.** I started my applications, day and night, I sent maybe 30 applications to different companies (Hanes)*

*At some point I was working, paying for my education and living and I was doing a teaching qualification and a PhD. **I trained my mind only to look at the positive** (Benjamin)*

# Power and agency on both sides

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Researchers in a position of power. However, participants also have the power to share what to disclose

*This [interview] for me is a conversation between me and you because you are the one that I know and that I trust. [...] **Researchers are always interested in our [refugees'] stories but we don't have to share them if we don't want to. Even if it's Professor 'somebody'.***

(Sadaf on her participation the research and on the anonymisation and transcription process)



# Some reflections and ongoing investigations

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- Key differences between the experience of foreign language learning and IC encounters of refugees vs other groups of migrants and sojourners (e.g., students).
- There should be a ‘good interculturalist’ on both sides of the researcher-researched nexus - ethical research recognising intergroup power asymmetries.
- Role of agency, self-motivation and **resilience** in participants’ accounts and ability to re-build their lives and careers...

# How to promote/support resilience? (Mercer & Babic, 2019)

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- **Human capital**
  - Training courses
  - Mentoring
  - Sourcing information
- **Social capital**
  - Creating networks
  - Joining communities of practice
  - Building and maintaining relationships
- **Psychological capital**
  - Promoting wellbeing
  - Developing optimistic explanatory style
  - Enhancing self-regulation strategies
- **Physical capital**
  - Maintaining physical health
  - Attending to sleep, nutrition and exercise
  - Prioritising self-care

# References

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# Thank you...!

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- Your questions, comments...
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# Critical Skills for<sup>22</sup> Life and Work

## Developing the Professional Intercultural Communicative Competence of Highly-Skilled Refugees

This is an **Erasmus+ funded project** which **aims** to design and implement effective training tools for enhancing key skills and competences of (a) highly-skilled refugees and (b) the language teachers who work with them, and so enhance the employability and societal integration of skilled refugees.

The **project focus** is on improving the achievement of this target group in key skills for professional intercultural communicative competence (PICC). For the teachers, the focus is on extending and developing their competences as educators by developing their abilities to teach PICC.

The **main output** of the project will be a toolkit comprised of two training modules:

- Professional intercultural communicative competence for work and life (for highly-skilled refugees)
- Teaching professional intercultural communicative competence (for volunteer teachers)

[www.cslw.eu](http://www.cslw.eu)



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